

“GREATER”

1 John 4:1-6

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into

the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. 4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. 6 We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

John begins this chapter with the word "Beloved..." The word speaks concerning an "esteemed friend." An intimate relationship. Thus John writes with an assurance of heart...both his and God's... toward the readers of this letter...those whom he considers to be either a genuine redeemed brother or sister in the Lord, or at least those who are amongst them that are truly seeking answers. We could easily read right through such a remark, but we must realize that it defines the nature of what John is telling us. For 3 chapters, John has been saying some tough stuff, and I'm sure he knew it. Not revolutionary thinking...not a new concept...but a truth that needed to be stated and stated emphatically. Few ministers in our day would be so bold. He no doubt hit a nerve amongst the original recipients of this letter, just as he no doubt has in our day and with some of us! Some of us may hear John's teaching and feel attacked or at least unduly confronted, and we may be apt to think that John is somehow 'kicking us under the bus.' Apparently perceptive of such a heart, John is reminding them that they are all "beloved," just as sure as you all are here.

John seems to have an underlying theme throughout this letter. Indeed, this letter presents several overt principles... things like manifested love, living holiness, and abiding in His grace. Yet there is still the clear message underneath it all: that things are not always what they appear to be when it comes to what we hear, what we believe, what is truly in our hearts, and who we authentically are. John was going where most men fear to tread...he was attempting to take us to a place of spiritual clarity. He was trying to rid the discussion of the grays, the fog, and the muddle of excuses and vagaries so common in the greater church world.

John's objective seems to be to clarify just who the "sheep" were and who were the "goats." (Matthew 25) He spoke of evaluating spiritual position and eternal standing. About knowing where we really are in relation to our Lord and Savior. John was writing to those who believed themselves to be faithful and mature Christians in a network of early churches, especially those in and around ancient Ephesus (modern-day western Turkey). One would no doubt be accurate in thinking that his letter would have caused some folks to "move on" when this letter was first read, just as it has and will do the same here for us today, I'm sure.



I believe, as did John, that this issue...the surety of our salvation, is one of the most critical considerations facing the greater church today. Because the fact stands that so very many people are filling the pews of America's churches today, that frankly...according to this letter, quite simply have never been born again. For truly, the 'mile wide and an inch deep' theology...the Jesus-lite-revisionist-historian position that is so widely accepted as Christianity today, bears very little resemblance to the Bible. Men have attempted to rewrite the path to salvation and eternal life, basing such upon a modernist culture and the 'new deal' we have attempted to make with our Creator. Clearly, there has been, *and still is currently*, a 'soft coup' happening, and so many of us simply do not recognize that today, and we will be lost eternally because of it.

It may *appear* that John has shifted subjects here, but in the true context, he has not. In fact, he is “doubling down” on what he has said so far and pushing that model even further, telling us not to just accept the status quo but to “test all things.” Like a lighthouse, he has graphically drawn a picture of a redeemed life: *what it looks like, what it acts like*, ...all in a loving attempt to wave us off from crashing on the reef. True to form here in our fellowship, we have so intensely found that not only is John likely to ‘take it on the chin’ for his words, but we have also been on the ‘receiving side’ of such for daring to embrace them. I have heard it all over the years. Every crazy reason for departing this church community that could possibly be invented, and is generally so void of the truth that it is darkly comedic. I suppose they feel they can get away with such stories because they figure that they will never run into any of us, but sadly that is an error in the fact that it is a very small town we live in!

The fact is...after 35 years of ‘doing church’ here, there is one overwhelming reason for people running away, and that is what John has so prescribed in this first verse: along the way, their ‘spirit was tested.’ Meaning that as they eventually sought to move beyond the pew and into service and/or position, or even to simply be included in the covenant body of believers, there followed a “higher level of expectation.” Both from God and from us. Ironically, that same expectation is found in every ‘real life’ scenario that exists in this world, but apparently is to be ignored by the community of God. They often believed and claimed some level of spiritual standing, but when the practical aspects of their life and lifestyle came under the bright light of interrogation...when expectations and personal perceptions did not match the facts and the positional requirements, suddenly pride and anger burst forth like the movie ‘Alien,’ and things got messy real fast.

Truth be told, nearly all of us tend to think we are more than we are in reality! We want to believe we are giants... maybe undeclared pastors and evangelists, teachers and ‘leaders of men’, when in fact we have so many miles to travel before we can consistently stand as an example without publicly and consistently falling on our spiritual faces! When that bubble is burst, we feel we have been ‘dis’d’ by the people in the church, and we all go in one day from ‘the best church around’ to a ‘cult.’ Not because of what we teach or how we operate, but simply because we follow the Bible and love them too much to let them die forever, even when it is frankly often uncomfortable to intervene in such a manner.

I have known many that fancied themselves to be pastors and teachers when their bondage to issues like porn was very nearly crippling, their spiritual graces were like those of a toddler and their scriptural education was so severally lacking that they struggled with the most basic of Christian practices...and yet they felt equipped to direct others in their life journey! As a family community, if you take a stand as a Christian here and yet engage yourself in openly ungodly pursuits, someone is no doubt going to call you on it. And that is when the ‘push comes to shove.’ The proverbial ‘other shoe drops’ and we are quickly “de-friended.” But sadly, we are so incredibly slow to question *ourselves* on these matters and pride consumes us to the point where we are unable to be so loved by a brother or sister to receive their perceptions of us, and we are quite unwilling to look critically at ourselves.

John has brazenly gone even further in this letter than even this! He is not merely dealing with service and position in the church, but with one’s very salvational standing. Our eternal “grade” for which there are extreme consequences, to say the least! This all has deep and far-reaching implications. From making personal decisions...dealing with the swampish quandary of our desires, feelings, and fickle emotions, to ascertaining

what God's will for us is. For many, God's divine will for us is always, *ironically and mysteriously*, exactly what we want! Wow! That's handy! Lucky for us that God never says 'no' or calls us to do anything uncomfortable, or allows any pain to come into our lives! Therefore, unless there are some true testing situations in our life ...unless there comes some authentic, real-life manifestations of the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit, then we will spend our lives standing precariously on the precipice of disaster.

Today's individual must take pause and consider all of this. Even the grander aspects of knowing whether a church or fellowship or even one's personal religious stance is right on or skewed in some manner. The world has a criteria for this. It generally involves what they would call 'tolerance,' but in fact it is "demanded acceptance," as well as public opinion, a social embrace, and a pleasing emotional outcome for all. We here in this fellowship however use a different model which is simpler, although it is certainly not easier to execute, navigate, or apply. We call it the Bible. That is our singular goal as we seek to run everything we do through that narrow sieve.

Are we to understand this passage in 1 John as saying that as long as we acknowledge that "Jesus historically came in the flesh" that we are "good to go?" That we are square with God and we then receive our plastic "Christian" badge in the mail in 6 weeks? Is that what John is saying? Because frankly, I have heard as much said by a lot of folks who are essentially today spiritually burning villages and pillaging homes. So, how can the 'bar' be so low as to essentially allow anyone in without what John has presented as legitimate qualifiers being in place? How does verbal affirmation equate to anything concrete? It doesn't, and frankly *we know it doesn't*. So how are we to read this passage?

The problem... as it often does... lies in understanding what certain words really mean, because our culture has an interesting habit of changing their meanings to fit the outcome. Even demons firmly believe and accept that Jesus is of God and came in the flesh, and I don't look for demons to be living next to me in eternity. (James 2:19) What actually is John saying then? What actually is "confession?" The modern dictionary renders that term as: *a written or spoken statement in which you say that you have done something wrong or committed a crime. The act of telling people something that makes you embarrassed, ashamed, etc. The act of telling your sins to God or to a priest.* Thus, by modern definition, confession is essentially a verbal affirmation.

Yet Strong's Concordance...a dictionary dealing with the original language terminology, renders "confess" as: *"to say the same thing as another, to agree with. To concede. Not to refuse, to promise. Not to deny. To profess."* And finally, it even encompasses this: *"to praise, to celebrate."*

Well, those are very different meanings, with very different applications! Thus far from a mere verbal declaration, the Strong's description could never be thoroughly exercised without physical participation. In order to "profess...to say the same thing as, and agree with" Jesus, I must actually do what He requires and seek in every way to live as He lived.

As Ray Stedman points out (Expository Studies in 1 John [Word], p. 296), *"It is significant that this warning comes in the midst of John's discourse about love, because false spirits tend to make a great deal of the subject of love. Every cult, every deviant group, every false movement makes its appeal in the name of love. Yet as we have emphasized throughout this book, we must ask 'by who's definition of love?'"*

The apostle Paul also warned us concerning false teaching and false teachers. *"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons."* (1 Timothy 4:1) Therefore we cannot just be leery of false **teaching** but also false **teachers**, because deceitful spirits and their demonic doctrines teach through people who advocate the false teaching. Believers must be discerning in all spiritual matters.

The current thinking today seems to revolve around the idea that, *"It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something."* Really? So if I believe I can jump off this building and flap my arms and fly, will it be a reality? Hardly. Believing such will have no effect on keeping me in the air. There will be those who would

argue that there is a great difference between science issues and spiritual matters. They would say that science is objectively true, whereas spiritual matters are subjectively true.

For centuries, it was universally accepted fact that the Earth was the stationary center of the universe, and the sun and all other planets revolved around it. Astronomers like Copernicus and Galileo helped debunk that. Phrenology was once treated as a rigorous medical science. It believed that an individual's intelligence and personality traits could be determined by the exact size and shape of the bumps on their skull. It was ultimately dismissed. At one time cocaine was widely believed to be a safe, beneficial "wonder drug". Medical professionals, pharmacists, and the general public embraced it as a cure-all, a local anesthetic, and a stimulant. Then there was the shells from living snails that were carbon dated as being 27,000 years old...living mollusk shells were dated up to 2,300 years old...and a freshly killed seal that was carbon dated as having died 1,300 years ago. So you really think science is a place to plant your feet?

We want to hold to the position that "If it 'works' for you, then it's 'true.'" But again, Satan often presents himself as an "angel of light." Many things 'work' in the strictest sense, but what or whom is behind such? I've seen water dowsing or water "witching" work, but through what power?

The contemporary thinking simply assumes that God is merely a projection of people's beliefs, rather than that He actually exists and that He is the creator of all that is. The Bible teaches that God really exists and that He spoke the heavens and earth into existence. The Bible also teaches the actual existence of Satan and other fallen angels, called demons. John says that behind all truth in the spiritual realm is the Spirit of truth and behind all spiritually false teaching is "the spirit of error," led by Satan, but including all of his demonic forces. Whether they know it or not, behind every false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit promoting the errors that they teach. Paul also said that we should "*not despise prophetic utterances,*" yet he added, "*But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.*" (1 Thess. 5:20-21).

The fact today is that many of us simply have chosen to believe all this God stuff. If it has...or *as long as it has*, a positive effect upon my life...or what I believe to be positive effects upon my life, I continue to "believe." When it 'fails me'...when it fails to give me what I want out of it, I often then cease to believe or I alter those beliefs. Yet facts and real truth do not change nor are they altered in any way by whether I believe them or not. This has so much to do with the 'failure' today of the faith of many! If it's hard, I cease to believe it is necessary. If it is no longer culturally expedient, I change my beliefs. If I want something bad enough, but scripture and God's Spirit say 'no', then I alter what is "true and factual." We then take on a new belief...one that claims that the understood meaning is not what the Bible meant, or that in my special case, I am given a 'pass.' Again, this fact has cost countless lives over the years, and is behind nearly every departure from amongst the faith at large.

This practice has been from the beginning, and is today more widely accepted than ever. Many of us are active participants in such practice and thinking, yet we are sitting in pews this morning "believing" we are ok with God. But our "confession" of faith says something very different! From the day that Satan deceived Eve in the garden, until the last days, when the final antichrist will deceive the world (2 Thess. 2:3-12), evil spirits have promoted false teaching to lead people away from the living and true God. When John says, "*many false prophets have gone out into the world,*" we should realize that these were not sinister, evil-looking characters. They didn't blatantly encourage Satan-worship or child-sacrifice. They often use Christian lingo and profess to believe in Jesus. They often have attractive personalities and convincing arguments. Yet Jesus calls them "wolves in sheep's clothing." (Matt. 7:15). Paul warned that these men disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness.

The bottom line in all of this is that "*to confess this truth about Jesus implies submitting your life to Him as Lord.*" (Rom. 10:9-10) Obviously, to deny that "*Jesus came in the flesh*" would certainly place one in the "unbeliever" category. But to "believe" that He did indeed come...to "confess" that He is God in flesh, requires that such is an unmovable and unchanging living aspect of our lives on this planet. Christianity...real redemption, is more than verbal affirmation or mental ascent. If I really believe that the roof of this place is ready to collapse,

then the fact is I would get out of here in a hurry. If I don't, no one would say I really believe it. True confession demands true action.

"Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world." What is actually "in" you today? Something you decided to believe in, or the presence of a never changing God ...that by His presence and activity in you, you "confess" in lifestyle as well as a verbal affirmation? The real child of God hears the truth whether it is out of scripture or out of the mouths of your brothers and sisters. Truth is truth. Of course, what they say must be scripturally backed, although much of what my brothers and sisters have done to guide me throughout the years doesn't have a chapter and verse. But I stepped back and looked at both the source as well as the factual weight of it.

Real belief...real confession, will be more than just a speech or a reason to sit in a pew on Sunday. The real thing moves. What we really believe is expressed by the confession of our living.